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PASS-2: Putting Youth Contribution at the Center of Positive Youth Development in Oakland High Schools

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Many of our best young people today wonder whether they have any place in this vast and complicated society of ours. They feel anonymous and rootless and alienated. They are oppressed by the impersonality of our institutions. In my judgment there isn't any quicker cure for that ailment than evidence that their society needs them. (John W. Gardner, 1968).

That many young people are in great need of connection and an authentic, meaningful, place in society is as true today as it was when John Gardner wrote these words in 1968. Positive youth development literature suggests that adults can create settings that effectively support youth to develop across five important foundational dimensions known as the Five C's: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring; and that this, in turn, will enable youth to develop in a sixth dimension: contribution (Lerner, Dowling & Anderson, 2003; Lerner, Bowers, Geldhof, Gestsdóttir & DeSouza, 2012). Some scholars, however, contend that prosocial youth development is not enough – systemic school reform must occur for youth in environments plagued by inequity and oppression to fully develop (Ginwright & James, 2002). An emerging discourse around social justice youth development suggests that positive youth development and systemic change are not at all at cross-purposes and can both be cultivated through a coherent strategy that begins rather than ends with a focus on youth contribution. Social justice youth development shifts the focus from the development of youth *in response to* the adult-created settings to the development of youth through *co-participation in* transforming their settings.

Some evidence exists that programs that provide youth with the opportunity to contribute by addressing issues in their local context (e.g., schools) develop many of the skills, habits, and capacities associated with the other five dimensions of positive youth development (Yates & Youniss, 1996; Strobel, Osberg, & McLaughlin, 2006). During the 2011-2012 academic year, the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities had the opportunity to conduct an implementation study of one such program, Peers Advising Students to Succeed (PASS-2) run by Oakland Kids First (OKF). The purpose of the study was to clarify PASS-2's theory of action and to understand youth and adult participants' experiences of the program in order to inform efforts to improve, sustain and scale implementation. This issue brief presents and expands upon a subset of the findings regarding the role of contribution in the context of PASS-2's approach to fostering positive youth development (Geiser & Quinn, 2012).

Program Overview

OKF is an independent, non-profit organization that informs district-level policy regarding meaningful family and student engagement and implements year-round youth development programs serving thousands of highschool students throughout Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), a large urban district serving 46,000 young people in Northern California's East Bay (California Department of Education, 2012). OKF's approach to youth development places youth contribution at the center of its efforts to transform both youth and their schools. For example, through a 2004 youth organizing campaign supported by OKF, a group of high school youth identified the high student-to-counselor ratio as a significant condition hindering on-time high school graduation and college eligibility. Consistent with a youth organizing approach, youth identified the problem and identified themselves as a critical part of the solution. This vision led to the creation of PASS-2.

On one level, PASS-2 is a peer academic advising program that trains older students (tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders) to teach ninth graders about high school graduation and college eligibility requirements through workshops and one-on-one mentoring. On another level, PASS-2 is a core strategy for integrating the social justice foundation of youth organizing with the evidence-based practices associated with positive youth development within the school day. PASS-2 provides a supported opportunity for youth to contribute by providing a direct service to ninth grade students in the form of academic mentoring and by situating their contribution within a broader framework of leadership within and beyond their school community.

Research Setting and Methods

The PASS-2 Implementation Study relied on qualitative data collected from students, teachers, and administrators in five high schools within Oakland Unified School District; Oakland Kids First staff; and PASS-2 mentor alumni over the course of the 2011-2012 academic year. The five schools enrolled between 122 and 1,900 students who were primarily students of color and socioeconomically disadvantaged. There was variation between the schools in the numbers of English language learners served, ranging from 5% to 53%. The schools also represented a range in terms of graduation rates and the percentage of graduates who complete a-g requirements (the minimum eligibility standards for admission into California's state university system). In most cases, no more than two-thirds of students graduated, and of those who graduated, no more than two-thirds graduated having completed the a-g requirements (Oakland Unified School District, 2012).

Data collection included hundreds of pages of planning documents, curriculum materials, and samples of student work as well as more than 60 hours of fieldwork, including observations and interviews or focus groups involving over 40 participants. The researchers analyzed data using qualitative analysis software to examine implementation processes and participant experiences within and across schools, and then triangulated emerging themes from multiple data sources and explored conditions that supported or hindered implementation.

Overview of Findings

One of the most promising findings was the way in which PASS-2 expanded traditional notions of youth development by situating contribution as an entry point rather than an end point of positive youth development in Oakland's high schools. PASS-2 was organized around a concrete opportunity

for youth contribution in the form of academic mentoring and leadership situated within the broader context of promoting social justice in and through the educational system. The opportunity to contribute by serving as peer academic mentors allowed youth, in turn, to see that their efforts to help individual students had the potential to be more broadly transformative in three ways: 1) by influencing youth outcomes overall (e.g., higher rates of on-time and college-eligible graduates), 2) by shaping classroom culture (e.g., a culture of success; a culture where adults experience and value youth contribution and respond with renewed practices), and 3) by improving their community (e.g., making it a place where all young people thrive). PASS-2's approach to youth contribution was woven into each element of its theory of action, including design principles, program components, preliminary outcomes, and long-term outcomes (for a longer discussion of PASS-2's theory of action, see Geiser & Quinn, 2012). Analysis of key findings regarding youth contribution in the context of PASS-2 suggested that youth contribution fostered:

- Broad and equitable youth participation
- Authentic and reflective leadership
- Development across the other five C's.

Finding #1: Contribution fostered broad and equitable youth participation

PASS-2 classes enrolled students with a range of academic records and diverse leadership experiences (e.g., elected leaders and students with no prior leadership experience). Youth were unanimous: the heterogeneity of the cohort was an essential element of PASS-2. Several student mentors felt very strongly that they would not have self-selected into PASS-2, yet they had benefitted tremendously from the experience and they were grateful that they had been encouraged (or required) to participate. In spite of the ways the heterogeneity of the student mentor cohorts benefitted the youth, a few teachers mentioned that the students who self-selected into the class were “easier to teach” and therefore made it easier to implement the PASS-2 curriculum. However, even with this caveat, they felt that all students—particularly those who were not seen as “traditional” leaders—added value to the overall experience of PASS-2.

The data made it clear that PASS-2 not only enrolled a variety of students, it also engaged all students as full and equal participants. One administrator observed that PASS-2 seemed to be particularly effective for students who were not “natural” or “traditional” leaders, noting, “They may not be the perfect model of leadership to begin with, but [through PASS-2] they learn to be leaders.” One partner teacher attributed students’ growth as leaders to the careful scaffolding and support provided by PASS-2. All five principals of participating schools were appreciative of the leadership skills youth mentors developed through PASS-2, and one noted that PASS-2 peer mentors were the students that tended to get “bumped” into other leadership positions in the school.

Finding #2: Contribution fostered authentic and reflective leadership

Many students reflected on the tension they felt between their desire to step up as leaders and their concern that leading would require them to “sell out” or become part of the system that had created and sustained persistent patterns of educational inequity and other forms of injustice. Students in one focus group were so concerned about this that they hesitated to refer to their work with PASS-2 as “leadership” until a student mentor introduced the concept of “leadership as helping others” into the

conversation. Student and alumni mentors consistently described two types of leaders: those who try to be *above* the people they are leading and those who work *shoulder to shoulder* to lead by helping and guiding those around them. All youth felt that the type of leadership OKF staff modeled and youth developed through PASS-2 was of the latter variety. Many student mentors framed their leadership as helping and guiding others from a place of “having been there,” rather than from a place of being “better than.” In fact, some mentors felt that they were still very much on the same journey as the younger students they were mentoring. One student mentor said (in reference to a “map to graduation” that was a part of the ninth grade workshops), “I never got any map. I gave out the map before I got the map.” A student at another school said her first reaction to hearing she would be a mentor was that she, too, needed a mentor. These two young leaders, like all PASS-2 mentors, understood that their strength as leaders came from their capacity to lead from a place of honesty, authenticity, and solidarity. Both student and alumni mentors became animated and vibrant when they described how the PASS-2 leadership curriculum, combined with the opportunity to teach ninth grade workshops and mentor ninth graders, allowed them to experience first-hand that they could make a meaningful difference not *in spite of* who they were, but precisely *because* of who they were.

Furthermore, while most student mentors spoke of contribution in terms of making a difference for younger students, several student and alumni mentors felt that PASS-2 had provided them with the opportunity to improve their schools. Partner teachers and administrators echoed the voices of the peer mentors and noted a number of ways that peer mentors were providing some level of service to the school community.

Finding #3: Contribution fostered development across the other five C’s

Youth and adult experiences of PASS-2 illustrated that authentic youth contribution provided peer mentors with the opportunity to develop specific knowledge, skills and qualities. Youth mentors and alumni named concrete skills such as “how to read a transcript,” personal qualities such as “dependability,” and more complex skills such as knowing when to “push” (and not push) on younger students in the effort to teach them new material. As peer mentors reflected on what they had learned through PASS-2, their descriptions of their experience spanned all five of the positive youth development dimensions. For example,

- Peer mentors described new areas of *competence* in a number of ways, including public speaking, knowledge of high school graduation and college eligibility requirements, facilitating small and large groups, and other skills needed as workshop leaders.
- Peer mentors spoke of newfound *confidence* in their ability to be leaders, including their comfort in talking to different groups of people and their ability to step up and take responsibility for change.
- Peer mentors described new experiences of *connection* with peers and adults. For example, they gained the understanding that sharing some of their own story might allow younger students to relate to them and trust them, that they could work well with people they did not necessarily like, that some adults respected them, and that they could feel solidarity with others engaged in similar efforts towards change.

- Peer mentors recognized the importance of particular *character* strengths in their new roles as leaders. These included open-mindedness, patience, persistence, a positive attitude, reliability, and resourcefulness, among others.
- Peer mentors reported new forms of *caring* in their lives. For example, they described caring for freshmen and each other, feeling empathy for adults in their schools, and appreciating PASS-2 partner teachers and OKF staff and programs.

Teachers' and administrators' observations supported the youth narrative. Adult and youth participant voices converged around a common theme: youth grew across positive youth development dimensions as they contributed to their school communities as peer mentors.

Implications & Opportunities

This discussion of findings related to youth contribution suggests two key implications. First, it is important to consider contribution as a *path to* rather than the *result of* growth across other positive youth development dimensions. The findings suggest that cultivating youth contribution concurrently with the other five dimensions offers youth a way to develop in a number of important areas while also positively engaging with and participating in the transformation of their school context. A contribution-centered approach to youth development holds promise for a variety of youth in a variety of settings, but it may be particularly important in under-resourced schools and communities. Student mentors noted that while PASS-2 was not the first time they learned about social justice issues, it was the first time they had an opportunity to respond in a meaningful way. The opportunity to *respond in a meaningful way* was central to the design, implementation, and participant experience of PASS-2 and proved to have tremendous potential for transforming both youth and their schools.

Second, youth contribution as it was operationalized and experienced in the context of PASS-2 complemented a number of other local efforts to support Oakland's youth, and may therefore lend itself to be part of a coherent system-level strategy for school reform. For example, during the course of data collection and analysis, OUSD was in the early stages of implementing a new strategic plan that included the engagement of a number of community partners in an effort to transform student learning and achievement. The district's plan included explicit attention to supporting social and emotional learning and meaningful student engagement (OUSD, 2010). Although not synonymous with one another, social and emotional learning and positive youth development share a concern for the positive development of young people across a range of dimensions that reach beyond, but also support, academic outcomes. The synergy between positive youth development's Six C's and various social and emotional learning competencies (see Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2007) suggest PASS-2 is an important complement to local efforts to foster social and emotional learning. Additionally, PASS-2's contribution-focused approach to positive youth development shared principles and goals with the move towards meaningful student engagement within OUSD. The district's meaningful student engagement policies and practices sought to establish youth as key stakeholders with power and voice in their schools and communities (OUSD, 2011). A sure way to engage students is to involve them in a real problem that influences their lives and calls out for a real solution towards which youth can work. By focusing on contribution from the start, PASS-2 affirmed youth power and responsibility in the collaborative work of improving Oakland's schools.

The synergy between OUSD's strategic plan and PASS-2's approach to youth contribution holds promise as a unique opportunity to integrate and expand upon the current notions of positive youth development, social justice youth development, and school reform. Through continued efforts to document, understand, and elevate the narrative of change that is emerging through the voices of PASS-2 participants, Oakland's story may demonstrate that it is not only possible – but absolutely essential – to renew discourse and practice around urban school reform to include supported opportunities for youth contribution.

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